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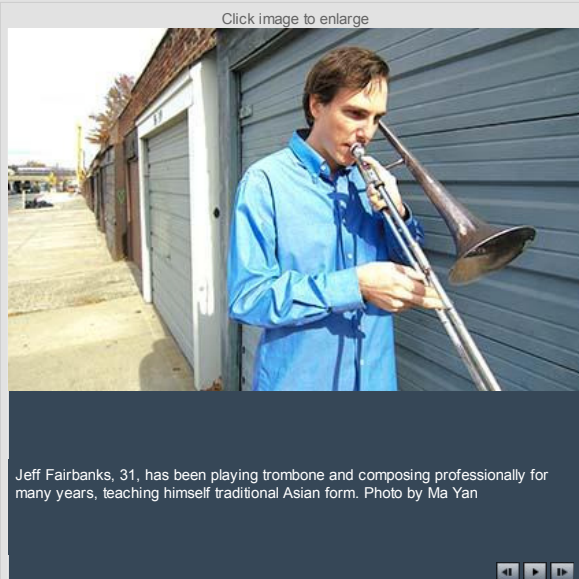
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## East meets West Jeff Fairbanks and his orchestra fuse multicultural sounds

By Tammy Scileppi  
 Thursday, May 26, 2011 12:12 PM EDT

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Jeff Fairbanks, 31, has been playing trombone and composing professionally for many years, teaching himself traditional Asian form. Photo by Ma Yan

Asian folk music fused with modern jazz? You've got to hear it to believe it.

For much of his career, Queens trombonist/composer Jeff Fairbanks has sought to merge his passion for jazz and his fascination with traditional Asian music — and has successfully created his own unique fusion of cool, brassy big-band sounds, accented by compelling Chinese instrumentals.

On Thursday, the talented musician and his band — together called Jeff Fairbanks' Project Hansori — will perform songs from their debut album, "Mulberry Street," at LaGuardia PAC (Little Theater), in Long Island City.

Project Hansori ("one sound" in Korean) features a cast of 18 of New York's top jazz musicians, including Fairbanks, the band leader.

"I treat it like a symphony orchestra. I compose the songs and most of the time I conduct," Fairbanks says. "It's a standard jazz big band with five saxophones, four trombones, four trumpets, bass guitar, and drums."

Fairbanks says half of his musicians live in Queens — mostly Astoria.

Fred Ho, who "knows how to make fusion sound good," is featured on the album.

Turning it up a notch, a visual arts component will be added to the concert at LaGuardia PAC.

Visual artist Jin Hwan Cho, a Sunnyside resident, will lead an exhibition of his works and those of five other Queens artists (Caroline M. Sun, Sook Hyang Baik, Youngsam Kim, Nancy Rakoczy, Jay Moorthy) in the theater lobby before the concert, and at intermission. Their exhibit, called "Resonance", is tentatively scheduled to open at 6:30 p.m., before the 8 p.m. concert June 2.

"Mulberry Street" (which won an American Music Center recording grant) delivers a surprising and unlikely symphony of exotic Chinese and familiar Western instruments and jazz compositions that mesh together yet retain their unique, intrinsic components. The resulting potpourri of rhythmic patterns takes some getting used to, but ultimately, becomes an amazing experience — almost transcendental. There's even a bit of Dixie thrown in for good measure.

What do you expect from a trombonist who's performed and toured with the iconic big-band era Glen Miller Orchestra's "ghost band," and received his master's degree in jazz composition? Asian-Jazz fusion is a difficult genre to play.

Fairbanks says he taught himself to write Asian traditional music through informal study. "I do all the orchestrations and compose mostly out of my head — that's my main thing — being a jazz composer, then a trombonist." He wrote seven of the nine songs in his album, which has a fast-motion street scene of Chinatown on the cover.

Interested in all that is Asian, the trombonist and his Korean wife, cellist Heun Choi Fairbanks, are very active in the Queens' Korean musical community. Fairbanks joined the orchestra at a Korean church, New York Presbyterian Church in Long Island City, where he still attends. His wife teaches at the church and at times performs with his orchestra on the album. For the past few years, they've lived in Sunnyside with their two sons.

Even though the 31-year-old musician was born and raised in Florida, he's very much a Queens guy. He enjoys eating chili at Aubergine's on Skillman Avenue in Woodside, and buys cookies and coffee at the local bakery there. His earliest musical influence was his dad's eclectic retro collection of cassettes; he says he couldn't get into the music of the '80s and '90s.

The musician's work tells a story with rich, colorful cadence. He drew his inspiration for the album's centerpiece four-part suite, Mulberry Street (commissioned by the BMI Foundation Charlie Parker Composition Prize), while playing with a brass band at funeral parlors in Chinatown — on Mulberry Street. "I've done this for the past few years, three or four times a week — it's my bread and butter," he says.

Fairbanks started playing at these funeral parlors in 2008, "after the other trombone player left, he recommended me to the band. Here's the thing... here, our band is just a brass band with six musicians. We play church hymns and stuff; sometimes they'll play traditional Chinese Buddhist music against us, using all Chinese instruments. There's a gong and even an accordion," he says.

"It totally clashes, but that's what they want — the chaos — because it's supposed to draw away evil spirits and ease the path of the deceased into the afterlife." The music is also meant to calm mourners.



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In his complex piece from Mulberry Street, "Part II, Scaring Evil Spirits Away with Joyful Sounds," Fairbanks' haunting rendition recreates this theme in a Chinese folk-style song. There's even a 500-year-old song that he interprets via fusion.

Fairbanks adds, "There was a bus crash in the Bronx that killed several people a couple months ago — a casino bus. Many were from Chinatown, and funerals were held there for some of the victims. I saw a big commotion on the street — local news covering it — I just played at one of those funerals."

Another piece, titled Woodside Story, is inspired by the energy and diversity of Fairbanks' old Woodside "hood" where he lived for three years.

Flushing Town Hall hasn't been the same since Fairbanks' band received a grant from the Queens Council on the Arts to perform there in 2007. He even served on their panel, and also won the Individual Artist Award, competing with other musicians and artists.

Achieving a cross-cultural popularity, Fairbanks is joining the ranks of the younger generation of Asian-Jazz fusion musicians.

"As a freelancer I play all over the place... at Swing 46 in the city, every Wednesday. It's all swing music, big-band era stuff... it's a jazz supper club on Restaurant Row on 46th Street."

He also plays at the Carnegie Club on 57th during the Sinatra show every Saturday: "There's a Sinatra impersonator who sings, tells jokes... It's a cigar bar so it's really smoky," he says. "It's pretty weird — to make a living you gotta do everything that comes your way."

Fairbanks has been commissioned by the West Point Band's Jazz Knights, to compose a new piece for their performance in the fall. They're a professional jazz big band that serves the West Point Military Academy.

Another CD release concert will take place June 30, 7 p.m. at The Moldy Fig, 178 Stanton St., Manhattan, [www.moldyfigjazzclub.com](http://www.moldyfigjazzclub.com) or 212-777-3727.

The album debuts on June 7. It will be available on [amazon.com](http://amazon.com) and [bjurecords.com](http://bjurecords.com). Grammy-nominee Darcy James Argue produced the recording.

IF YOU GO

Jeff Fairbanks' Project Hansori

When: June 2, 8 p.m.

Where: LaGuardia PAC (Little Theater), 31-10 Thomson Ave., Long Island City

Contact: (718) 482-5151

Website: [www.lagcc.cuny.edu/lpac](http://www.lagcc.cuny.edu/lpac)

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